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The Modern Local Historian in Africa

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Abstract

The introduction of literacy into African societies has added writing and printing as dimensions to the communication of historical knowledge. A by-product of this development is the availability of new information sources for historical-folkloristic research, namely, the works of local historians. In most cases these appear in thin pamphlets, published by local printers, and circulate among a local educated public; occasionally, their reading audience extends beyond the boundaries of the original indigenous community and reaches university historians, who treat these publications as if they were primary sources for historical reconstruction. They are thought to reflect the common view of the past that prevails in a given culture. They represent the folk history of the people or, if the term is used in a fashion that parallels the concept of "ethnoscience" (Sturtevant 1968: 462-464), their *ethnohistory*. Hence, the attribute of primacy relates to ideas about history and does not indicate the nature of the testimony.

Disciplines

African History | African Languages and Societies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Oral History | Reading and Language

The Modern Local Historian in Africa

DAN BEN-AMOS

The introduction of literacy into traditional African societies has added writing and printing as dimensions to the communication of historical knowledge. A by-product of this development is the availability of new information sources for historical-folkloristic research, namely, the works of local historians. In most cases these appear in thin pamphlets, published by local printers, and circulate among a local educated public; occasionally, their reading audience extends beyond the boundaries of the original indigenous community and reaches university historians, who treat these publications as if they were primary sources for historical reconstruction. They are thought to reflect the common view of the past that prevails in a given culture. They represent the folk history of the people or, if the term is used in a fashion that parallels the concept "ethnoscience" (Sturtevant 1968:462–464), their *ethnohistory*. Hence, the attribute of primacy relates to ideas about history and does not indicate the nature of the testimony.

Theoretically, such a view is justified since writers of these pamphlets obtained knowledge about the history of their society through the culturally established communication channels. They heard stories about the past in the context of storytelling occasions; they were able to infer the historicity of events and personalities from linguistic allusions and metaphors; they pondered the meanings of place names; and they attempted to reconstruct past episodes from the annual commemorative ceremonies in which they participated. When all these modes of learning proved insufficient and gaps in their knowledge of tradition remained,

This research project was conducted under the auspices of Midwestern Universities Consortium for International Activities during 1966 and received further support for its continuation from the National Institute of Mental Health.

they deliberately questioned specialists, who retained and recited historical narrations and genealogical lists.

The publication of such pamphlets has shifted the locus of authority over historical traditions, transferring it from the elders in the community to the printed word. The permanence of written accounts, coupled with the prestige accorded modern forms of scholarship, has enhanced the position of historical writings in the community. No doubt, such a shift is not absolute and does not equally affect the entire community. Whenever the printed account contradicts the knowledge gained from traditional authorities, it is easier to blame the authors for inaccuracies and errors than to find fault with oral history. After all, individual writers are more vulnerable to criticism than is an anonymous tradition. Yet, in spite of the potential criticism, the factors of stability and modernity weight the balance in favor of print over oral transmission.

The works of the Bini local historian Chief Jacob Egharevba can illustrate the position historical writings have attained in both traditional and academic communities. The Bini people of Nigeria are proud of their history. The Benin kingdom was one of the main western African empires, and its traditional history abounds with tales of intra- and intertribal warfare, conquests, and victories. The Benin empire reached its political peak in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, during which time the sovereignty of the *Oba*, the "king," was respected as far west as Dahomey (Bradbury 1957, 1959, 1967). Egharevba took it upon himself to unfold before the modern world the greatness that was Benin, recording the oral traditions and examining them critically.

Egharevba conducted his study of Benin history and culture in the 1920's and 1930's. During that period, the elders of the community were people who had acquired their historical knowledge within the Bini traditional framework, and their information was only slightly affected by the impact of British influence following the punitive expedition of 1897, which left Benin in ruins (Akenzua 1960; Boissagen 1897; Bacon 1897; Roth 1903:ii-xxi; Ryder 1969:277-294). Today this generation is virtually extinct and such knowledge is rarely available. Egharevba collected from them narratives, testimonies, and historical explanations, matched these with various fragments of information, smoothed away any conflicting views, and molded the materials into a composite version of the traditional history of Benin. On the basis of his own knowledge and this extensive research, Egharevba amassed a great deal of information that is traditionally unavailable to any single person in Benin. Customarily, this historical knowledge is distributed among various keepers of tradition: priests, whose task it is to memorize the royal genealogy; ceremonial singers, who incorporate historical information into their ritualistic songs; and narrators, who entertain their audience with stories of Benin's heroic past. No individual in Benin is completely familiar with all the

historical, religious, and social information that Egharevba accumulated through laborious research and synthesized in his works. The publications that resulted from his studies are numerous (P. Ben-Amos 1968a:6, 13–15).

Prominent among them is *A short history of Benin* (1960), a book that had a great impact on Benin society and has come to be known as the authoritative account of Benin past. Although some factions in Benin, because of their own social and personal interests, belittle the book and consider it full of inaccuracies, most people in the city regard it as the accurate rendition of Benin history. Bradbury (1959:267–268) cited an extreme case in which the then *Esekhurhe* [priest of the royal ancestors], whose duties include memorization of dynastic lists, resorted to Egharevba's work rather than relying on the information he had obtained orally from his father, who himself was Egharevba's informant. Thus, Egharevba's work has a confirmative function in the transmission of oral tradition in Benin.

For modern scholars this book represents the traditional and uncritical version of Benin history. As such, it often serves as a convenient starting point for the examination of the validity and accuracy of oral tradition in the light of documentary evidence. Researchers naturally find many cases in which traditional narrative history is incongruent with external testimonies, archival materials, or simple empirical logical reasoning, as Bradbury (1959:267–268), Ryder (1965:25), Wolf (1963:193–218), and Kalous (1970) illustrated on several occasions.

The scholarly acceptance of the written rendition of oral tradition as a true representation of the "historical beliefs" (Hudson 1966:53) and "the common view of the past" (Sturtevant 1968:463) ignores a basic aspect of culture change. Features do not simply replace each other. The introduction of a new element into a society involves a subsequent readjustment of the entire system. This is true of economic and social aspects of life and is equally applicable to the communication of historical knowledge. Thus, the writing of tradition also entails the incorporation of new attitudes toward the concepts of truth, historical fact, and causality. Local authors acquire their new ideas through formal Western education and extensive reading. Literacy enables them not only to write oral tradition but also to expose themselves to the influences of modern historical writings. Therefore, the transition from oral to written communication also involves a shift in the models for descriptive accuracy and explanatory adequacy in historical narration and a redefinition of the boundaries between possibility and probability in history. Local historian-writers do not accept the validity of an account merely on the basis of its verification by traditional authorities. They subject the narratives to critical logical examination in which belief alone is no longer a standard for inclusion or exclusion of facts in the description of the

past. The narratives must meet the criteria of analysis and critical judgment.

Furthermore, by the very act of writing, the local historians address themselves to an audience that has nontraditional models for historical narration and explanation. In their own writings, the historians make a conscious attempt to approximate these new examples and to meet the expectations of logic and order with which they associate their potential readers. Consequently, the local historians could not possibly commit to print traditional ideas about history.

Through a partial misunderstanding on my part, a situation evolved in which it became possible for me to examine the modifications that Egharevba had introduced into the traditional Bini conception of historical accounts. While doing research in Benin on the communicative forms and techniques of oral tradition, I paid several visits to Egharevba. We conversed in English and I explained to him that my research required me to be present on occasions in which Bini people tell stories and sing songs. Egharevba understood correctly that my interest was directed not only at the formal aspects of entertainment but also at the content of the tales themselves. After several such visits, Egharevba seemed slightly offended at not having been asked to relate the history of Benin, since he rightly considered himself the most knowledgeable person on that subject. I tried to explain that my position as a folklorist, not a historian, necessitated that the present study be focused not on what really happened in the past, but only in the way people view it, regardless of truth. In fact, I expressed a readiness to listen to tales that the Bini considered fictional, tales they knew had no historical validity. In the course of that conversation, the discussion turned to various Bini terms for traditional narratives, and Egharevba offered to relate nonhistorical stories — that is, tales that he knew but that he had excluded from his book on the basis of relevancy. He considered them fictional narratives. Thus, by contrast, these tales provide some clues to Egharevba's conception of history, the range of realistic possibilities and probable causalities, which, in turn, one would be able to compare with Bini views of history.

THE TALES¹1. *Tortoise and the Devil*²

The tortoise was a student under the devil for years, and there he learned all the wisdom and the cunning [that] he usually applied all about. When he left the devil, when he finished his time and left the devil, some years it was after [that] he thought of going to Ife and made an elaborate preparation. Before going, anyway, he consulted from a seer, or the diviner of the *lh'ominigbon*,³ whether his journey to Ife would be prosperous. The diviner advised it, to send, to send . . . a she-goat, a fat she-goat, mashed yam, [a] knife and other necessary things to its master, the devil, before going.

The tortoise began grumbling that he ha[d] served the devil for many years, and there is no reason again that it should send him any things. When the diviner emphasized that [the tortoise] should do so, well, he promised to do so when he returned from Ife. He went, or [sic] when going, he knocked one of his feet to something, which — eh — foretold a good omen, that the journey would be very prosperous.

Accordingly the *Olofin*⁴ of Ife, or the king of Ife, the old king of Ife, gave him as presents very many valuable things. On his return journey home, well, he ordered his followers to carry him so that his legs will not touch the ground, and that he might not get a wound at that time. When he was nearly home he asked them to put him down, that . . . he would not encounter any difficulty any more. Immediately he saw — an old man . . . He asked the tortoise . . . please to shave his head for him. Because they were cursing him, the head was cursing him, the ears. The tortoise began to shave. When he shaved [one] part and turned to the other part, before shaving, the other one [would] . . . grow again. He began to shave it. Before shaving the other part, the hair of the other part [would] grow again. He was surprised. He continued shaving, continued shaving. Consequently, all his followers deserted. All his followers ran away when they saw that the old man was no other man but the devil, the master of the tortoise. The tortoise took excuse from the master devil that he go to discharge urine in the bush, and from there he ran away, and hid himself under . . . dirt things, see, under a dung hill, just like a dung hill. Well, [when] the devil shouted for [the tortoise], he could not hear the voice. So he took all the property home, you see, he made use of all the property that the tortoise brought from Ife. Well, ever since the tortoise [is] to be found in a thick

¹ Chief Jacob Egharevba told me these tales in 1966 at his home. He spoke in English with occasional insertion of Bini terms. Although at times he searched for the correct word, corrected himself, or repeated himself, his English was fluent. The text is a transcription of his narration. I omitted only phrases that were repeated because of hesitation or external interruption. The most common self-correction in Egharevba's English narration was the substitution of *it* for *he* in reference to animals. The Bini language has a single pronoun for third person. (I would like to thank Rebecca Agheyisi for her assistance in the transcription of these texts.)

² Egharevba refers to *Esu* (a harmful messenger of the gods in Bini beliefs) (Melzian 1937:42).

³ A diviner who used the seeds of the tree *Ogwega*, *detarium senegalense*, for making his predictions. The seed is broken into two parts, then tied together, four halves on each string. The diviner casts four such strings in front of him and informs the person of his future. Melzian states that the term *ominigbon* is synonymous with *ogwega*. The term is not in common usage and is preferred by the masters of this divining art (Melzian 1937:137, 145).

⁴ Usually the title of the ruler of Ife is *Oni*. The *Olofin* is the title of rulers of other Yoruba cities like Oyo.

bush or under a dung hill. You see, ever since. So this lesson taught us that whatever may be the necessary advice given us, we must always, we must always act with it. You see, we must always, we must always act with it, accordingly, so that we might not meet any trouble or mishap.

2. *The Vulture and the Wise Man*⁵

At one time in those days, the people wanted to kill a vulture and eat it. And before doing so they had a very good meeting over it, and they sent a wise man called Umewaen⁶ to the next world to interview fathergod.⁷ The wise man went to the next world, to the heaven, and when he got to the fathergod, he told him all the messages that were sent through him. Fathergod said: "All right." He sent him to a place to lodge and asked him to give him a few days to consider the matter. The wise man agreed. He did so.

On the very day that the wise man left for heaven, the vulture also went to a diviner and consulted what [it] should do, what it should do to escape the danger. The diviner advised it, to get a parcel of cola nuts, tie it and to put one at the top of it and put it in the square between the world and heaven⁸ and then come back, and the third day to go to the heaven. The vulture did so accordingly. When he got to the fathergod, on the third day, he [was] received . . . very well.

On the third day, [the fathergod] sent the wise man to go and buy cola nuts for him from the world market. When he was coming, he saw the parcel of cola nuts which the vulture, he did not know, which the vulture sacrificed. He took it to the fathergod. The fathergod said: "Well, ah! you returned so quickly? He said: "Yes." He said: "Yes, sir." From these cola nuts, the fathergod offered or gave to the vulture, and the vulture told him that this is the cola nut that he sacrificed in the square between the world and the heaven.

Fathergod said: "No!" It was bought by [the man].

"No," he said. The vulture emphasized that it was the sacrifice cola nut that he sacrificed in the square between the heaven and the earth. Thereupon fathergod said to the wise man to testify to the fact, and he agreed that it was the very cola that he brought to fathergod. Fathergod, enraged, enraged he growled [at] him and said: "You are a liar! You told him⁹ yesterday that it was, that you bought it from the market, on the world market. Now you confess that it was a sacrifice cola nut. Why did you bring a sacrifice cola nut to him?" So fathergod [was] vexed and chained the wise man in heaven forever and charged the vulture to go free, that whoever killed it and [ate] should die with it. The vulture returned to the world rejoicing all about. And ever since, well, it is rigidly forbidden to kill and eat vulture. Anybody that attempt[s] it will die immediately. So it is a parable among people then, that the wise man is in heaven and the vulture is in the world. If the wise man had returned from the heaven, well, the vulture would be eaten. So, they

⁵ For another version of this tale, see Egharevba (1950:52–53).

⁶ The word *ewaen* means "wisdom"; *um* is perhaps a variant of *omo*, or "child." Thus the name means "child of wisdom."

⁷ Egharevba's translation of the Binet epithet *erha n'osa*.

⁸ *Ada* means "junction" or "crossroads." According to the Bini world view, a hole in the ground leads to heaven. The road ends where heaven and earth meet. This is the crossroads of heaven and earth (*ad' agbon ad' erimwin*). According to Egharevba, any hidden place can be regarded as such a square.

⁹ Fathergod refers to himself.

say, well, a child said, or says, well, a vulture can be eaten. And they asked him: "Those who eat or have eaten the vulture, where are they?" He said: "They have gone to the heaven."

So this story, this imaginary story, teaches us that we must always tell the truth. That nothing but the truth will save us, as the truth saved the vulture. We must always avoid telling lies, but the truth, the perfect truth, the whole truth.

3. *The Vulture and His Mother*

In these days, the elders sent the vulture to Ife as an ambassador. Before going, he consulted the oracle, *ominigbon* oracle, whether or not his journey to Ife would be Prosperous. [He] was asked or was advised by the *ominigbon* diviner to get rotten things all rotten things, all kind[s] of rotten things and sacrifice to the square which leads to Ife. He said: "All right." [He] will do so. When he got home, he began to make preparation and promised to make the sacrifice when he returned from Ife. He went. [He] was warmly received in Ile-Ife. On [the] returning journey — or in those days, the journey to Ile-Ife always took a period of three years. About a week of his departure from home, his mother began to [become] sick, seriously sick. She was treated, but the treatment failed. At any rate, she died. The corpse was accordingly tied in a bamboo mat, *aghen*, we call it, *agen* bamboo mat, tied it and put in the square leading to Ile-Ife.

Of course, when the vulture was returning home, [he] was so hungry, [he] nearly died of starvation. When he got to [the] square, [he] did not know the corpse of his mother and [ate] a quantity, if not the whole, and then came home. When he got home, he went directly to the palace and delivered the message and gave account of his embassy to Ile-Ife. When he got home, well, he learned that his mother was dead. He asked the cocks. They told him: "The corpse has been sent to the square leading to Ile-Ife. And they learned that you have eaten a quantity of your mother's corpse or meat."

This is what the vulture could not, you see, stand. Immediately he ran to the heaven and gave the account to god and entreated him endlessly to be merciful on him, or on it, to make it possible that all people of the earth . . . [eat] their mothers as [he] has done, as [himself] has done. Oh, fathergod looked at him, he moved in mercy with him and said: "All right." So fathergod made something like breast in the breast of all women so that every child must suck the breast before growing up, if at all, a week or the very day. Ever since, everybody on earth ha[s] to eat his or her mother, as the vulture has done previously. This is the end of the story. It teaches us also that it is quite necessary for us to be doing according to the advice of the divination, *ominigbon* divination, or the advice of the seer or diviner to us, because if the vulture had taken the advice, the mother could not have [been] so seriously sick and died before his return from Ife.

4. *The Olokun*¹⁰

The Olokun in Benin was a man, or is a man and not goddess, it is a god not goddess, as always [has] been with the English people.

In those days, Olokun was a great god of the sea and the fountain of riches. He

¹⁰ For another version of this tale, see Egharevba (1950:50–52).

was so rich that at one time he was boasting, bragging that his father the almighty god did not excel him in anything, or surpass him in anything, or surpass him in anything. The boasting was so awful that a special meeting was convened over it, and the people asked them to fix a day for a special exhibition to know who is the greatest, the most powerful, the most sensible and the most universal or popular. Accordingly seventh day was fixed for them to appear for the people to see. On the seventh day fixed, almighty god sent a chameleon and clad it with changeable colors to tell to the Olokun, to tell him to dress very well, because Olokun is his son; he did not like him to be exposed to a great shame before the people. When the chameleon reached the Olokun's palace, he asked the servant of Olokun, he sent a message through the servant of Olokun, that he was sent by almighty god, his father, to [give] him a special message. Olokun came out, with his hands supporters, his wives, his forward followers, in a gay dress to see the chameleon. When the chameleon was delivering the message, the Olokun, in a surprise, saw the same dress that he put on the chameleon. "Ah!" he [said] surprised, retired again, put on another gorgeous dress, appeared again. He saw the same with the chameleon, he retired again, put on more fine dress, more beautiful wives, fine-figures followers and hands supporters, with a brass chair *agba*, coral beads dress, coral crown, eeh, all over. Alas, he saw the same thing on the chameleon. "Ah!" he exclaimed, that if a chameleon, the messenger of his father, the almighty god, could put on the same dress as himself, how then the almighty himself will look like. He therefore sent a messenger, the chameleon, to the palace to tell his father, the almighty god, that he is the king of kings, lord of lords, and a man who is the choice of the people. On his part, that he Olokun submitted, submitted himself, to god today and forever, the Olokun. At this message, there was a shout, a shout of applause among the tongues of people, crowd of people surrounded almighty god. Then the meeting was dispersed.

This is the end of the story.

Before he started the narrative that follows, Egharevba commented that, unlike the other tales, the following is a true story, albeit surprising.

5. *Ezalugha*

One man, named Ezalugha, he was a medical student under the *Ake*.¹¹ *Ake* was one of the famous heroes of Ewuare's reign. He was a student of, medical student under *Ake*. When *Ake* died, well, he began his master's work. According to custom, the people of that village Ilobi in Isi sent the young men to bring yams to the Oba at Benin City. And Ezalugha was numbered with the people. When they got to the palace, the yams were delivered and carried into the palace. Then they arranged a match, a wrestling match. They began to wrestle. Ezalugha came out. He knocked several people down, to the shame of the people of the city. And he could not be knocked down. At that time, there was a beautiful girl, called Ebhu, a daughter of the then Iyase.¹² Ebhu witnessed the wrestling match and concluded to marry Ezalugha. Without delay she followed him home, to his village home

¹¹ According to Egharevba (1960:16), he was a hero who was deified by the Bini people. He is worshiped as the god of archery mainly in the Isi villages (Melzian 1937:6, 100).

¹² One of the more important Bini chiefs, the head of the *Eghaebho n'Ore*, the town chiefs. He had the sole right to argue or censure the Oba in public (Bradbury 1957:25-28).

Ilobi. About a year of her arrival there, her father died at Benin City. So, well, they had to prepare for the burial and for the internment and burial ceremony. Well, Ezalugha did not come along with Ebhu his wife, but when she is ready to go, Ezalugha has a medical axe and an axehead; he placed it in the shrine of his goddess of medicine Osun. On the very day that Ebhu was leaving for Benin City, he took the axehead from the axe and put it on the ground for Ebhu to cross over. Ebhu did not know, she crossed it and came to Benin City. Well, the internment took place and so they began the burial ceremony. According to custom, after the completion of the burial ceremony, they have to give thanks to the people who came to help them and who helped them during the occasion. Well, they were thanking the then *Uwague*¹³ chief. Then *Unwague*, a great chief in Benin, pressed Ebhu to extend his love to her. Ebhu refused. He pressed her on and on. Well, Ebhu took leave of him to go home first and return. Well, Ebhu returned after the thanking. He forced Ebhu again. Well, when they were in the action, you understand me? When they were in the action, you see, when they were in sexual knowledge, you see, sexual intercourse, well, a cock feather from the axe in the shrine of his goddess of medicine Osun began to ring like this, to wave like this, wave like this, which tells Ezalugha that somebody was doing something to his wife. Immediately, he put the axehead to the axe and they were together. The man could not come down of the woman, and the woman got no place to escape. They were there until they called for the help of the householder, who tried and failed. The neighbors were invited, they tried and failed. They covered them with a cloth down. They invited all the medical people, all was a failure. Well, the incident was reported to the Oba, and immediately, the Oba invited his medicine people, the *ewaise*; they tried their skill but failed. Well, the diviner consulted the *ominighon* divination, and it was advised to sen[d] for Ezalugha from Ilobi in Isi. The Oba sent two messengers. That very night they went there and returned the man.

When he was coming, he put the axe and the axehead in one of his bags. When he got to the palace, the Oba asked him whether he knew something about it.

He said: "Yes, he did it." Well, the Oba asked him to release the people immediately. He took the axe away from the axehead and they, the man and woman, the man now completely came out from the woman[']s breast. But they were fated and died. You understand. Ezalugha was arrested as a murderer. He was sent to the *ewedo*, prison. And then the decision was taken to send him to *osa*, to sacrifice him to the god of *osa*. Accordingly on the third day, *Unwague* arranged all the quarter people, himself dressed in a gorgeous attire he [stood] on a stool and ordered Ezalugha to be bound. He was bound back and was ordered to be executed. Ezalugha shouted, shouted, to [evoke] the spirit of his goddess *Osun*, *nigigio*, [and it was] this occasion that arranged to save him from this danger to the surprise of the people. He repeated again, again,

Okhuo (i) fu ohunmwun!

Emuen!

Igho igbo gboo!

Igho igbo gboo!

Igho igbo gboo!

Emuen!

Okpolemu n kpol' emun!

Egbe ere o ro!

¹³ The head of the Iwebo palace society. He supervised trade with European merchants (Bradbury 1957:39; Melzian 1937:207).

Okhuo ru ehunmwun!
Okhuo ru uhunmwun!
Okhuo ru uhunmwun!
*Okhuo ru uhunmwun!*¹⁴

Surprisingly, when he was about to be executed, well, they find him sat on a chair, and the *Unwague* who was on the chair in a gorgeous attire was executed. The people trembled and trembled, trembled and trembled, feared and shouted, cried to the palace to tell the Oba. When the Oba heard the news he discharged the man to go home freely. Well, when he was about to go, all the physicians, the native doctors arranged themselves, had a meeting that the man had actually put them to shame . . . in the practice of their knowledge of their medicine.

When he was going, he transformed himself into a pregnant woman. The people lined, hid themselves in the bush all the way, about a mile long. He wonderfully passed away to his village Ilobi in Isi, safely, unhurt. Everybody was surprised at him. So he was ever since called and appel[l]ated *Ezalugha n'ebo ma hie*; that is *Ezalugha* whom medicine never failed. This is the end of the story. He was feared and respected throughout the history.

6. *The Calabash of Wisdom*¹⁵

The tortoise was universally known to be the wisest of all beings. And accordingly, they used to boast and brag about their wisdom. On one occasion a tortoise, however, thought within himself, or within itself, that he will put all the wisdom of human beings or all the wisdom of the whole world in a calabash and cork it, so that nobody should get the sense again. Accordingly, one day he did so, corked it and [was] going to bury it in somewhere. When he was going, he met a very big fallen tree across the road. He put the calabash of wisdom on his breast, so that it may not be seized away in its back. Well, as it was attempting to cross the tree, it could not because of the calabash on its breast. He was patrolling here and there about the fallen tree, he could not cross it through on account of the calabash on its breast in the front. But when a man was coming, who did not know the intention of the tortoise, [he] said to it: "What are you doing, tortoise?" "Well, I wish," he said, "to cross this tree," but the calabash in [his] front, could not allow [him] to pass through. So the man laughed and laughed at him saying: "You the wisest of beast? You are so fool, to put the calabash of the wisdom on your breast. Can't you put it in the back and then pass all the same?" He did so, he passed away safely. So he was greatly ashamed that it had been boasted that tortoise was the wisest of all beings and now he was put to shame. So it broke the calabash of the wisdom into pieces and scattered everywhere. So, ever since it is not quite necessary for any man, he may be all wise, he may be master of knowledge, to be boasting that he was wiser than all the people in the world because a small boy, it was a small boy who put or killed the giant *Arhuanran* in *Udo*,¹⁶ or David the

¹⁴ Probably *osun* incantations. I was unable to translate this text.

¹⁵ For another version of this tale, see Egharevba (1950:46–47).

¹⁶ In the tradition of Benin City, *Arhuanran* is known as a stupid giant, the son of Oba *Ozolua* and the brother of Oba *Esigie* (ca. fifteenth through sixteenth centuries). *Arhuanran* was born first, in the morning; *Esigie* was born on the evening of the same day. However, since the news about the birth of his sons reached the Oba in reverse order, *Esigie* was considered the legitimate heir to the throne. This situation, according to tradition, was the cause for the great animosity between the two brothers. In the many stories and proverbs about *Arhuanran*, he figures as a powerful giant whose strength exceeds his sense.

small child killed the Goliath. So, it is not necessary for anybody to boast of his wisdom or his power, or his knowledge, or anything that he would do. This is the end of the story.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN ORAL HISTORY

These tales, together with Egharevba's *A short history of Benin*, make possible a close examination of his own adherence to and deviation from tradition. These modifications will be discussed in terms of (1) the performance of historical narratives, (2) the generic categorization of narratives, and (3) the actors in historical narratives.

The Performance of Narratives

The telling of history in Benin on traditional occasions involves both singing and speaking. The songs are interspersed between the narrative episodes and are often an integral part of the plot. They provide a respite in the flow of actions and enabled the audience to partake in the chorus and in this way actively to participate in the telling of tales. In that regard Bini storytelling hardly differs from the performance of narratives in other African societies. As a result of the performance situation of traditional narratives, songs become an integral part of the conception of history in Benin in direct contrast to Western narration of history, which focuses upon political, military, and economic affairs and excludes songs of kings, soldiers, and peasants as irrelevant. Curiously, while Egharevba does not replicate in his writing the stylistic features of oral narration — he omits repetition and opening and closing formulas — he retains some songs of narratives as an indispensable part of the historical account. Egharevba (1960:45) quotes a soldiers' song, a festive song of a royal wedding (1960:19–20), and a lyrical song of a suffering king (1960:39), and thus transforms entertaining elements of storytelling occasions into historical facts.

The Generic Categories of Narratives

The singing that is interspersed throughout the prose narration probably serves to relieve audience fatigue, actively to incorporate the listeners into the storytelling, and to recapitulate the actions told in prose (Innes 1965). In Benin, however, the mode of performance serves also as a taxonomic mark that differentiates between two genres of stories: *okha*, a tale with songs, and *umañanmwēn*, a tale without songs. A third genre,

ere, functions as a parable, a short narrative that the speakers may apply directly to particular conversational situations. Thus the very characteristics of the act of narrative performance serve for generic distinction in Benin. The criterion of truth, historical validity, which Bascom (1965) uses to construct an analytical system of prose narrative classification is hardly applicable for taxonomic purposes to Benin tradition. Depending on one's informants in Benin, truth is either a universal attribute of tales or it stands in free variation with fiction. Thus, both *okha* and *umařanmwēn* could be either historical or fictional. *Ere*, however, is regarded as a true narrative, since its rhetorical effectiveness depends upon its validity. Consequently, the validity of narrative cannot serve as a distinctive feature of the different genres, and it is irrelevant to the native taxonomic system. This fact does not imply, by any means, the insignificance of truth in the evaluation of prose narratives. Rather, the faithful, detailed, and realistic description; the orthodox, though not necessarily verbatim, adherence to the traditional version of tales; and the constant verification of the historicity of events by reference to landmarks and distinct places are a few of the literary devices that are used to enforce the notion that the events in the story really happened. This is comparable to the aesthetics of visual arts (P. Ben-Amos 1968b). The *Märchen*-like anonymity of the characters and places is almost absent from any narrative genre in Benin.

It is with respect to this very basic cognition of tradition that Egharevba differs from his fellow Bini. Egharevba not only employs different terms to designate the narrative genres of oral tradition but also conceives of new features by which to distinguish them. It is hardly surprising to find out that, as a person with an acute sense of history, he could not be content with a communicative taxonomy of narratives and replaced the traditional system with an idiosyncratic classification in which truth is the distinctive criterion. According to Egharevba, the two polar narrative genres in Benin are *itan* and *umařanmwēn*, which relate to each other as truth to fiction, history to nonhistory. *Okha* retains a middle position in this system as a story that could be but is not necessarily true. Most of the tales Egharevba told me were, accordingly, *umařanmwēn*. Actually, his comprehension of this term is based on a literal-etymological interpretation of the word. *Umařanmwēn* is a compound that consists of two components, *uma*, "council," and *ařanmwēn*, "animal" and, literally, it means "council of animals" (Melzian 1937:12, 206). Hence, Egharevba's consideration of this genre as fictional is based on inference from the etymological-literal meaning of this compound.

The second major change in Egharevba's taxonomic system of oral tradition is the introduction of *itan* as a name for a prose narrative genre, a term that is borrowed directly from the Yoruba language, in which it

means “myths, traditions or ‘histories’” (Bascom 1943:129).¹⁷ In Benin, the same word, *itan*, refers to another verbal genre altogether: that of the proverb.¹⁸ This semantic change is an idiosyncratic innovation introduced by Egharevba himself. In fact, he rendered the title of his book, *A short history of Benin*, as *Ekhere vbe ebe itan Edo* (Melzian 1937:45). However, most Bini, I found, use the word *itan* in the sense of proverb, not of history. For example, it appears in that way in the title of the book, *Iyeva yan ariasen vbe itan edo na zedu ere ye Ebo* (Aigbe 1960). Thus Egharevba provided an existing Bini word with a new semantic meaning in order to be able to formulate his own taxonomic system of Bini oral tradition.

These cultural and personal conceptions of narrative categories that underlie Egharevba’s attitude toward the content of the tales explain the principles of thematic inclusion and exclusion of incidents from the respective genres. By adopting new distinctive qualities for genres, Egharevba, as a local historian, sets his own rules of selectivity of topics for potential inclusion in the history of Benin. Still, his view of history only partially reflects the conception of historical facts, actions, and actors in Benin tradition.

The Actors in Historical Narratives

The fictional narratives that Egharevba told me share one main feature: their protagonists are animals. This characteristic seems to have been the principal criterion used by Egharevba for their exclusion from the category of historical narratives. After all, it is unreasonable to believe that the tortoise, the vulture, and the chameleon actually talked, interacted with people, and behaved as humans. Yet the nature of the *dramatis personae* constitutes a feature that distinguishes fiction from truth only in Egharevba’s conception of oral tradition, and it does not correspond with the common Bini view of history.

¹⁷ Although the term *itan* has an identical orthographic representation in both languages, it is pronounced *itan* and *iton* in Bini and Yoruba, respectively. Thus Egharevba’s usage of the term is phonetically similar to the Bini *itan* and semantically identical with the Yoruba *iton*. (I would like to thank Rebecca Agheyisi for clarifying this point for me.) The fact that Egharevba makes use of Yoruba terms and narrative category can be explained by his own biography and does not reflect the influence of Yoruba culture on Benin. He was born in the western region and continued to have family relations there.

¹⁸ Melzian (1937:102) provides four meanings for *itan*: “(1) proverb, (2) story (mainly exemplifying a proverb), (3) meaning or moral contained in a proverb: *itan re* ‘its meaning,’ (4) history (with an application for life) with a moral.” Actually, this range of meanings in *A concise dictionary of the Bini language of southern Nigeria* would apparently constitute an additional difficulty since it contains both meanings of *itan*: the commonly accepted one of a proverb and Egharevba’s own translation as history. If we take into consideration that Egharevba himself was one of Melzian’s informants, however, it is possible to assume that some of these interpretations are his own contributions.

Unlike Egharevba and perhaps other educated people, traditional Bini tend to regard animal tales as truly historical narratives. The events related in these stories took place during the *Ogiso* period of the previous ruling dynasty. The animals were courtiers in the *Ogiso* palace in *Idumwan-Idu* (Bradbury 1957:19). They often breached accepted rules of conduct and, in many cases, their actions were plainly destructive. The attributes of the tortoise, for example, are not only cleverness and wisdom but also wickedness and malice, and his present-day nonhuman appearance is considered a punishment for this antisocial behavior.

This punitive transformation is compatible with Bini beliefs concerning death and afterlife. Accordingly, after the dead reaches the land of the spirits (*erinmwin*), he may be reincarnated in new living form, either human or animal. Thus present-day animals are degraded incarnations of previous human beings. Fourteen such reincarnations (*aria 'bhehe*) are possible. In other Benin narratives, as well as in the texts provided by Egharevba, there are often lapses from human to nonhuman references to these characters. The narrators may refer to them in terms of human attributes, the most distinguished of which is speech, while at the same time they continue to develop the plot on the basis of the animal features of the heroes. These narrative methods are not based on literary personification of the animals, rather, they draw on the assumption that the tortoise (*egwi*), the chameleon (*erokhin*), and the spider (*akpakpa*) were at one time human beings (Evans-Pritchard 1967:23–27). The narratives are mostly anchored in the *Ogiso* period and not in the present time. Yet the remoteness of that era does not invalidate its historicity in the Bini cognition. From the Bini viewpoint, the *Ogiso* period is neither mythical nor semimythical, as Bradbury (1957:19) has designated it. In spite of the political change and the dynastic shift, there is a sense of continuity in Benin history, and any imposition of dividing lines between one era and another will be in disregard of the Binis' own conception of their history.

In a similar manner, Egharevba modified traditions about human figures when they appear to contradict experience. For example, according to Benin indigenous history, Oba Ehengbuda lived 200 years as a prince, 200 years as the *Edaiken* [crown prince] of Uselu, and 200 years as an Oba. Egharevba modifies this tradition and states carefully that “it is said that Ehengbuda lived thirty years as *Oko* [prince], thirty years as *Edaiken* of Uselu, and thirty years on the throne.” Thus, while he preserved the formulistic structure of this biographical scheme, he cast it into terms that were more compatible with the experience of reality.

More significant than the occasional modifications of biographical details is the general focus of Egharevba's work, which by the very selectivity implied in the idea of “short history” actually alters the range of historical events and personality in Benin tradition. Egharevba's work centers around the royal family and, to a certain extent, is not so much the

history of Benin at large as the chronology of its rulers. By choosing this framework for this account of the past, Egharevba followed not only traditional court genealogists but also European historical scholarship, which for years focused on the central political body and neglected to pay the political struggles at the sidelines the attention they deserve. However, without disregarding the central position of the Oba, the Bini people also tell about the battles between rural chiefs and their continual struggles for power. At the time of this research, the most popular tale among storytellers was the story of Agboghidi, a rural chief whom Egharevba (1960:34) mentioned only in passing. The information in this story, which the Bini regard as historically valid, may have as much relevance to the ethnohistory of Benin as the tales Egharevba included.

A FINAL WORD

No doubt, local historians such as Egharevba have contributed greatly to the process of recording African history. Even if their work is not considered at all times historically valid, at least it is assumed to provide a faithful account of the traditional views of the past. This brief discussion, illustrated by Egharevba's work and conversations, clearly demonstrates that it is necessary to exercise caution in this respect as well. The effects of literacy run deeper, in that case, than was previously suspected. The learning of writing and the commitment of local traditions to book form involve the incorporation of the values and conceptions of literate society, which are not necessarily related to the mechanics of writing. Moreover, the written local histories are geared to a new reading audience outside the traditional groups to which the oral narratives are intended. This change in audience involves further modifications in traditional views of history in terms of the selections of details and the explanation of historical causality. Consequently, the final result differs from the historical beliefs of the group. In order to examine the relationships of such writings to the common views of the past, it is necessary to seek corroborative evidence from a source that is both old and new, namely, the local traditions that are still available. Only a comparison with these sources enables one to evaluate the relationships between folk history and ethnohistory.

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